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ABSTRACT

There is a need to generate an improved American educational perspective that does not deliberately undermine and/or destroy the basic structure of the family by devaluing the very processes and behaviors required to develop and maintain that essential structure over time. To accomplish this, the idea of the existence of acceptable behavior codes, which affect a social reality beyond the self, must be addressed. These behavior codes must suit the needs of the larger society. More educational researchers and practitioners must acknowledge the existence of a societal force beyond the self and communicate this to the students. There must be an acknowledgment that there should be a larger social responsibility and that this sense of responsibility is necessary for the maintenance of American families and their civilization. There is concern for the current educational direction and the emergent, self-centered dysfunctional family. The free dispersal of ideas without some semblance of ethical structure has contributed in some degree to the behavioral confusion in our society. Educators need to respect the student's democratic right for self-choice while providing the opportunity for the exploration of the purposes of civilization. Acceptable standards of human behavior that promote strong family units within appropriate societal parameters are essential. Additionally, America must not ignore the potential value and importance of promoting these social standard within the instructional processes of the public school system. (Contains 12 references.) (AUTHOR)

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Running Head: CALL FOR COMMON SENSE AND ETHICAL PRACTICE IN AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The Voices Crying in the Wilderness: A call for common sense and ethical practice in American educational reform

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Abstract

Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to construct an argument for legitimizing the effort(s) of finding the appropriate blend between the current direction of progressive, American public educational practices and the best societal consequences/results for its families. Basically, there is a need to generate an improved American educational perspective for the 21st century that does not deliberately undermine and/or ignorantly destroy the basic structures of the family by devaluing the very processes and behaviors required to develop and maintain that essential structure over time. In order to accomplish this, the idea of the existence of acceptable behavior codes which impact a social reality beyond the self must be addressed. These behavior codes must suit the needs of the larger society. Somewhere along the line, more educational researchers and practitioners must acknowledge the existence of a societal force beyond the self and communicate this to the students. There must be an acknowledgment that there should be a larger social responsibility and that this sense of responsibility is necessary for the maintenance of American families and their civilization.

The Voices Crying in the Wilderness: A call for common sense and ethical practice in American Educational Reform

After many years as an American educator, I have come to the conviction that the American public school system needs to reshape/revisit its philosophies of education for the new millennium and closely scrutinize the resulting, emerging social reality to which its current progressive philosophies and practices are contributing. In short, through careful examination, we need to unflinchingly get a firm grip on what is actually happening to the family/social structures in American contemporary society, assume the subsequent challenge for initiating responsible action, and reassess our educational direction/focus for the 21st century.

Specifically, the purpose of this paper is to construct an argument for legitimizing the effort(s) of finding the appropriate blend between the current direction of public educational practices and the best societal consequences/results for families. Basically, I feel that we need to generate an improved educational perspective for the 21st century that does not deliberately undermine and/or ignorantly destroy the basic structures of the American family by devaluing the very processes and behaviors required to develop and maintain that essential structure over time. The idea of the existence of acceptable behavior codes which impact a social reality beyond the self must be addressed. These behavior codes must suit the needs of the larger society. Somewhere along the line, more educational researchers and practitioners must acknowledge the existence of a societal force beyond the self and communicate this to the students. There must be an acknowledgment that there should be a larger social responsibility and that this sense of responsibility is necessary for the maintenance of American families and their civilization. Have Americans become so empowered and

self-important that we cannot listen to the dual voices of history and reason on this issue? Are we as Americans so self-assured that we cannot acknowledge the existence of biological and psychological experiences of others beyond those we may experience ourselves?

Admittedly, this emergent, complicated undertaking necessitates honest and open communication between all parties involved while allowing for input from a multitude of perspectives and voices. During this process, some of the most profound voices, the children, will be unable to speak for themselves. For that reason, educators will, also, need to listen to the voices of the caretakers and teachers of children. In America's market-driven society, the lost voice(s) of the children will need to be supported by those willing to speak for them.

Upon first consideration, this task might seem overwhelming. One might even question the possibility of accomplishing the effort itself and, subsequently, dismiss the challenge. Still others might choose to give up and buy into the current trends. I maintain that few, however, will dismiss the importance of the issue once he/she considers the cost. I propose that the cost is the loss of functional family structures that could, finally, result in dysfunctional behavior(s) by children and, still later, the repeat of dysfunctional family patterns. Each stakeholder in this issue realizes that an analysis of a social vision will converge to the point where the explorers will be given the opportunity to label, and, then, accept and/or reject the consequence(s) for past educational practices and either ignore or rework the system. Once labeled, I hold that these conclusions should be responsibly addressed.

On a national level, the Educational Excellence for All Children Act of 1999 has recently been generated by the U.S. Government in reaction to the recommendations of

The National Educational Goals Panel (The National Education Goals Report, 1998). A part of the document proposes that Americans address the issue of school readiness for children. Surely, common sense dictates that functional families play an incredible role in producing children whom are ready to attend school.

Currently, at the end of the 20th century, some educators are finally, sheepishly, admitting that the high planes of progressive educational philosophy and theory should be tied down to actual teaching practices (Griffiths, 1997). I believe that this whole notion of current educational theory not being securely tied to actual teaching practice(s) through detailed information of how a particular theory both positively and negatively impacts a society demonstrates a fundamental lack of integrity. An absence of knowledge or a withholding of knowledge about the processes involved in grounding any theory might reveal either a general lack of ability by the philosopher to predict the consequential impact of a theoretical construct or, even more ominously, the purposeful intent of deconstructing a culture's existing beliefs/structures while withholding information about the consequence(s) of a theory to achieve some undefined purpose. Philosophers know that a theory, once accepted into the minds and actions of a culture, does have impact. The responsible members of that culture should make efforts to insure sure that the exact results desired are not, through inappropriate application, intentionally or unintentionally undermining areas we know to be essential to the perpetuation of any society in the history of the world. In American society at the end of the 20th century, are we losing our ability to determine best choice for the family structure?

To demonstrate that educators have an awareness of the necessity to address the grounding of philosophy in workable practice, one can consider the emergence of the

action research movement. The general idea of connecting the lofty mountains of philosophy and the swampland of practice is demonstrated by the recent movement toward action research. Action research is not research on education. It is about research's effect on education (Martin, 1995). Now that we are labeling effects, why not revisit and analyze the forces generating the existing big picture?

A few, reflective citizens have gotten to the point of questioning some of the impacts of Progressive Education practices implemented during the last century (Williams, 1999; Howe & Dougherty, 1993). These questioning voices are gaining strength and resolve. Educators are speaking up about the predicted and actualized weaknesses of Progressive Education (Thigpen, 1994) (Maritain, 1943). Frankly talking about the impacts of Progressivism and its results will not be universally popular because doing so will, ultimately, require educators to test the boundaries of both the camps of theory and practice. However, I propose that the task can be accomplished and, indeed, must be accomplished. The initial strands of that reflection process are there. The possibility of juxtaposition between the theory and practice is currently being bantered around in academic circles. I maintain that the time has arrived to seriously reflect about current educational direction and the emergent, self-centered, dysfunctional family, mindset being adopted by many American citizens during the later part of the 20th century as demonstrated by recent trends in television and the mass media (Williams).

Let's consider the historical perspective

In the early 1900s, amid the emerging pressures of the Industrial Revolution, John Dewey, a noted American visionary, foresaw a substantial change in the purposes of the educational system for the upcoming century in light of technological

development. He, subsequently, advocated reform. He is now associated with the concept of Progressive Education. Obviously, that movement has served its initial purpose. Technological advancement in the United States has been astounding in the 20th century. At this point in educational development, however, one needs to address the possible limits of the movement. In other words, what happened to the family structures in society as Americans made these technological advancements?

Upon reviewing educational history in the 20th century, a researcher might get the distinct view that educational research has systematically enabled the labeling of previously existing, not yet academically explored human phenomena. Researchers have busily devoted lives and are currently devoting entire careers to carving out and labeling incremental educational realities through a breadth of time. Most of these realities legitimately existed and still exist within their particular framework(s). Indeed, all appear viable within particular contexts. The realization of the existence of something "out there" was/is exhilarating and challenging. Many noted men and women rose to the challenge of documenting the educational development(s) of mankind in varied scenarios. They pushed the proverbial limits and excitedly revealed their findings to a waiting world. What did they find?

Basically, researchers labeled various models of teaching, various human perspectives, biological realities, various cultural phenomena, a multitude of instructional strategies, educational technologies, appropriate research methodologies and more (Joyce & Weil, 1996; Crowl, 1996; Dembo, 1994). American public schools, in turn, zealously followed the way and promoted the progressive ideas of knowledge acquisition and scientific inquiry as an answer to life's complex issues. Numerous professional educators contributed to the field by writing and marketing numerous

textbooks promoting their particular learning theories and various educational disciplines. In short, research on education has become exhaustive.

I maintain that at this point in history, so much research has been done that professional educators are clearly becoming able to label integrative strands of knowledge. The initial chaos and overload of information is finally developing into logical patterns. Educators are now able to know enough to acknowledge the possibility that those once seemingly distinct paradigms and perspectives can and are blending (Erickson, 1995). Particular strands are useful within each area depending upon what needs to be accomplished. One should not run from these integrative findings, even if it means educators might have to admit to being less that totally informed about various past beliefs/purposes.

Extensive reading reveals that certain human behaviors have remained constant through time. For example, one might refer to classical literature throughout the ages as a proof of this. Human behaviors occur within differing contexts, but the basic behaviors are repetitive from one generation to the next. This is not accidental. These behaviors occur over and over because there are particular attributes of human biology that have remained relatively unchanged over recorded history. Ultimately, however, even something as basic as human biology must be directed and managed within a field of acceptable choices if any society is to be maintained through time. Look at Greek and Roman historical accounts and consider the fall and destruction of great civilizations from the past. There is nothing new here.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Why not acknowledge a distinct separation between the dual purposes occurring within the public school setting --- the purpose(s) of knowledge acquisition and

scientific inquiry within specific fields of study and the cultural and the social purpose(s) of communicating the best in human behavior codes to subsequent generations?

From this split perspective, it is common sense to believe that some elements of Progressive Movement need to be limited and restructured. I firmly believe that the free dispersal of ideas without some semblance of ethical structure has contributed in some degree to behavioral chaos/confusion in our society. Sadly, I maintain that some educators have become disillusioned and/or confused about their purpose in the classroom. Within some branches of the progressive theory base, the teacher exposes the student(s) to all sorts of new ideas with no imposed structure and no attention to how this information acquisition impacts their personal lives. The effort to figure out what is going on in the process and the ultimate use of the knowledge is left unguided and solely the choice of the learner/child. The progressive educational message focuses on the means to the end, not the end (Maritain; Thigpen). In most instances, this appears to benefit the child on a surface, immediate level. However, determining best choices for a life is a complicated process for a child. These issues are difficult for most adults. No wonder the children are confused.

Additionally, the parents may or may not be an acknowledged part of the educational, developmental process. The children are supposed to be able to handle the conflict inherent in the process when they encounter conflicting ideologies between their parents and the instructional setting. One popular novel, Dead Poet's Society, written by N. R. Kleinbaum in 1989, depicts the fate of one student caught between the horns of this particular dilemma, educational information versus parental views. In this

book, this student ends up committing suicide because he is unable resolve the conflicts he experiences from this conflict.

Some educators may not have realized the startling effect that the progressive educational philosophy would ultimately have on particular levels of American society by the end of the 20th century. As one observes the news and other mass media, one can see that many American citizens have become increasingly violent and empowered with a level of self-will that ignores the needs of others (Williams). Teachers are watching some children come to school without the benefit of a firm grounding in traditional structures and behavior codes that has promoted a particular social conduct over the centuries. Principals are watching parents threaten lawsuits on a multiplicity of issues. The public education forum has become confusing and, sometimes, discouraging on many levels for the practitioner.

Many American teachers acknowledge a general lack of home training in the students they teach and shake their heads in disappointment and helplessness. Some of them decide the issue is too large and get out of the field altogether. Notably, in private, educational practitioners admit between themselves that some of these neglected behavior codes that are among the very ones necessary to create the foundation to maintain a family structure over time. Without a traditional framework to provide an initial grounding/background children are placed into American public schools, social institutions that focus on and promote self-development, self-promotion, and self-gratification. In some extreme cases, anything, any issue beyond the self is considered too heady and ethereal and not based in our created educational reality. Standards of conduct within disciplines of knowledge are promoted over standards of discipline related to specific behaviors of human beings within social contexts. The attack hits

from all sides. When are schools teaching balance? Why not push for educational paradigms that encourage the integration of relevant social behavior patterns by the student? (Zimmerman & Martinez-Ponz, 1990).

To support this contention, I maintain that the current, upper socioeconomic levels in American society went through significant periods of transcendence upon arriving in this country. These periods of transcendence were the times when the families had to look within, not accept the easy way out, and meet the various obstacles of their life. These experiences often required these people and their families to go against the grain and accomplish the improbable. This often required sacrificing for the larger picture. They had to overcome. They had to climb the mountain. Aren't these attributes some of the vehicles for social ascendancy? Let's label them. Let's talk frankly about them.

Functional families do exist. The factors contributing to functional families need to be identified and studied. Dysfunctional families need to be trained in the processes involved in developing functional homes. Yes, the American people should be allowed to choose from the best options available. Why deprive the "yearning masses struggling to be free" the solid foundation of a functional home. So, why can't educators mention the possibility of a person selecting a belief/behavior system that acknowledges the existence of an established social structures beyond himself/herself? I maintain that functional families are crucial to American society's survival.

I am not advocating particular religious instruction within a public school setting that is attended by a multiplicity of individuals with divergent backgrounds, each unique. However, educators need to provide for or assist with the development of the simple demarcations for the boundaries of the self and the family while the student

experiences the shifts, disintegration, and building processes inherent within the educational experience. In other words, the educator needs to respect the student's democratic right for self-choice while providing the opportunity for the exploration of the purpose(s) of civilization.

In recent years, the telltale signs of the neglect of this point have emerged in American public schools. The issue of school violence has grabbed national attention. Educators know that many children are arriving at school unable to recognize best choices. Schools are getting programs for children earlier and earlier in an attempt to help with perceived social ills. Yet, sadly, these same institutions can only provide institutional love. Institutional love, often demonstrated through a systematic application of accommodation techniques and theories, is not real love. Real love that promotes human development and growth within structure is best found in a functional home. A school cannot and should not become a homeplace. I maintain that no teacher can replace a responsible, loving parent. Child development within a recommended structure has been the secret of great mothers and fathers throughout time. Why do we keep this a secret from those in need of this information? Why do we accommodate without saying a word instead of educating through directed effort to accommodate and fund the symptoms of dysfunctional living situations?

Accommodation techniques make the receiver feel good about his/her current situation. Does it effect real change? Or should it merely set the stage for the change? Whatever happened to feeling good about meeting a challenge and going against the grain. Character? Does this have a value for the 21st century in the United States? Are Americans losing a sense of the standard? When one destroys the standard, the children will have no ground from which to launch. It is generally acknowledged that functional

families provide excellent support systems. What can be done for the children from dysfunctional families who are caught in cycles of neglect and abuse? I believe that those students, also, need a strong base from which to develop.

Education in America serves a social purpose of making good citizens and helping people live better lives. However, not all students are entering the school system with an appropriate foundation and family structure. Without this ethical structure, the children of dysfunctional homes are sometimes misinterpreting knowledge which has been encapsulated within politically correct jargon and applying that same attitude in other, non-academic areas of their life. Unfortunately, some are empowered in poor choices. I maintain that there is a difference between what has been said and what needs to be said. America must create a forum that enables the presentation of relevant, social positions and posits best social choices within the classroom.

Notably, in recent years, character education programs have emerged in some American school districts during the last decade and their acceptance is growing at a grassroots level. Historically, religions have provided the basis for the behavior codes of a civilization, and all of Americans must also acknowledge the respect that America's founding fathers had for freedom of choice in the selection of a religion. In fact, this fundamental right is guaranteed in the United States Constitution. How will this issue be addressed in the public schools? Who dares remind the general population of the value of adopting standards in order to maintain a family? What impact does this choice to remain silent and/or turn the other way have on the youth?

Most admit that appropriate standards create excellence. In America, best choices enable an individual the acquisition of social/cultural position beyond current standing. This is no secret to good parents who have worked within that premise for

centuries. However, some people in American society are never given the opportunity to figure this out until it is too late for them. They come from dysfunctional situations and receive no information within some existing public educational forums of the possible value religion, community service, and/or character education programs might have as solutions to human behavior issues beyond the classroom walls.

It is true that educators cannot force people to accept change or assume an attitude of responsibility. Authentic change must come from within. What, however, is inappropriate with labeling a problem and allowing people to derive their own possible direction from a comprehensive list of best choices?

Basically, American society must delineate between political parameters and common sense. I feel that America must make decisions in the best interest of the families. In order to accomplish this, America needs to revisit the purpose of the public education system. America may need to come to a consensus to help its families.

What to do about the needs of its families is the greatest challenge of the next generation in America. This formidable task may require an adult act that has historically been one of the hardest in life to assume…social responsibility. I speak boldly for the ones who have been ignored and stepped upon by the processes of progression---the lost voices of America's children in need of some direction to create/maintain the functional families of the future.

Conclusion

In my view as an American public educator, the common battlecry for the United States in the 21st century should be for the preservation/restoration of the best choice(s) in family structure(s) and, consequently, the maintenance of those elements essential to the continuance of its civilization. I maintain that America must consider the

possibility of finding some way to encourage its citizens to respect its heritage and promote the establishment of acceptable standards of human behavior that develop strong family units within appropriate societal parameters. Additionally, America must not ignore the necessity of mentioning the potential value and importance of promoting these social standards within the instructional processes of the public school system.

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